

Book Review: Organizing Exhibitions: A Handbook for Museums, Libraries, and Archives.
By: Freda Matassa London: Facet, 2014. 302p.

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Abstract:

Creating an effective exhibit is a challenging prospect at best. Whether it is a small exhibit or a large one, it takes a great deal of planning and organization. In her new book, *Organizing Exhibitions: A Handbook for Museums, Libraries, and Archives*, Freda Matassa has drawn from her considerable experience and expertise in collections management and museum practice to create a step-by-step guide on how to design and implement an effective exhibit that will generate interest and feature collections in new and innovative ways. Although the book focuses primarily on large-scale displays, the general theories and practices discussed can be applied to any size exhibit in any type of venue

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Article:

Creating an effective exhibit is a challenging prospect at best. Whether it is a small exhibit or a large one, it takes a great deal of planning and organization. In her new book, *Organizing Exhibitions: A Handbook for Museums, Libraries, and Archives*, Freda Matassa has drawn from her considerable experience and expertise in collections management and museum practice to create a step-by-step guide on how to design and implement an effective exhibit that will generate interest and feature collections in new and innovative ways. Although the book focuses primarily on large-scale displays, the general theories and practices discussed can be applied to any size exhibit in any type of venue.

Collaboration, communication, and documentation are important themes throughout the book and all figure prominently in a simple breakdown of the author's ten tips for a successful exhibit. These tips include establishing a clear plan and budget, designating specific areas of responsibility to an exhibit team, creating a timeline, and keeping to a schedule. Matassa also lists common pitfalls that often plague exhibitions such as an unclear purpose, a lack of

communication, and a loss of interest. Each chapter of the book is designed to avoid these difficulties, and the author leaves no stone unturned.

The book is divided into two distinct parts. The first part gives an extremely detailed description of how to execute an exhibit, from its initial concept to its closure. The second part serves as a directory for more technical and detailed information, including resources for international exhibits. Mattassa's approach is always clear, organized, and practical. Particularly helpful are the comprehensive images, forms, checklists, and documentation templates that give a clear illustration of the author's precise and systematic planning methods.

Matassa begins by stressing the importance of developing a clear vision for any potential exhibit. A thoughtful, unique, and well-researched concept naturally translates to decisions involving title, scale, and featured objects. This initial phase is crucial, as it will result in a viable proposal that will lay the groundwork for the planning stage of the exhibit. The author recommends taking time to evaluate the available exhibit space, consider the potential audience, create a list of objects to be displayed, and estimate the cost. As goals and objectives for the exhibit are established, projected outcome, general strategies, and possible risks can be identified and assessed.

Once the vision for the exhibit is set, the planning phase begins and it is at this time that project management becomes a key component. Matassa emphasizes the importance of assembling a skilled, cohesive project team with a strong project leader, no matter the size or duration of the exhibit. The project leader will delegate responsibility among team members, ensuring that all areas of exhibit planning are given adequate attention. Scheduling consistent team meetings, monitoring a comprehensive timeline, and establishing clear and direct lines of communication cannot be underestimated when planning an exhibit. After the installation, the exhibit team will transfer its attention to measuring the originally proposed objectives against the actual results, altering the exhibit as needed. This well planned organization and communication workflow will continue until the exhibit is dismantled.

After the planning phase is completed and project team has been put into place, the organization of the exhibit can truly begin. The author gives a great deal of attention to object selection, which can be particularly complicated, especially if some items need to be borrowed from private collections or institutions. Stressing communication and documentation, Matassa suggests detailed questions to ask when borrowing objects. Issues such as dimensions, insurance, transportation, and special requirements for display, are handled in the initial planning phase. More involved information about this and all other topics covered in the book are cross referenced with more detailed information in the directory (Part II). The author gives every matter proper attention, from broad topics such as planning touring exhibits to more mundane concerns like signage and visitor barriers. She also covers the details regarding maintaining and promoting the exhibit, as well as events and programming that must be addressed after installation.

One of the most interesting subjects covered in the book is the importance of legacy. While exhibits are temporary, their impact and influence can last for years to come and it is for that reason that creating a lasting legacy should figure prominently in all phases of the exhibit. A very practical part of an exhibit's legacy is its documentation. Records of all aspects of the exhibit should be kept and archived, including details of the design, forms and agreements, budget data, printed material, statistics, photographs of the displays, and visitor feedback. These will be important factors when evaluating the exhibit to ascertain accomplishments as well as lessons learned.

Matassa points out that there are many long-term benefits that result from a successful exhibit, including research and publication opportunities, fundraising prospects, and new relationships developed with individuals and the community. The author gives specific examples of exhibits that have made significant impacts and had lasting influence on the public, such as the 1862 International Exhibit in London when Japanese porcelain was introduced to Europe, the 1913 Armory Show in New York which displayed modern art to an American audience, and finally the more recent Chinese terracotta warrior exhibit which shared a major archeological discovery with the world. Although these are obviously exceptional examples, even more modest exhibits can have a lasting influence; therefore, legacy should be a constant consideration.

Ultimately, each exhibit is a unique event and choices made about the aspects such as the topic, objects to be displayed, and programming must be tailored to the available space, the financial resources, and the individual taste of the museum, archives, or library staff who create it. To this end, Freda Matassa intends her book for curators, archivists, librarians, public history students, or anyone who needs assistance planning and implementing an exhibit. This extraordinarily comprehensive, well thought-out guide will certainly serve as a model for all types of exhibits, whether they be held in an international venue, or at the local library.